



## Preparing for a visit to the dentist

There may be many reasons for a child with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder to be reluctant to visit the dentist. They may not understand why someone would want to look inside their mouth or dislike that a person they do not know is physically in their personal space.

There are also many sensory reasons for this aversion. The dentist may need to shine an overhead light into the child's mouth which can be overwhelming for them and the clinical smell of the surgery can also be off-putting.

We have to remember that the mouth is one of the most sensitive parts of the body and the prodding and poking of instruments can feel painful. There may also be many strange noises which can also be over powering.

### What can we do to help?

- Prepare your child as soon as you can about an upcoming appointment. They may need visual support to help them understand what will happen on their visit. E.g. first sit in the chair, then dentist look in your mouth, then sticker and home.
- For some children it is helpful to have a social story about a visit to the dentist. This may help them prepare for what might happen and give them a strategy to help them if they are feeling anxious. For example "Put your hand up and the dentist will stop and give you a rest"
- It may be helpful to use a video clip to help show another child having their teeth examined.
- You may want to ask your dentist to give you either the first or last appointment of the day. This is likely to be quieter. Your dentist may be able to book you a double slot so they can take things at a slower pace.
- It is important to provide your dentist with as much information about your child's needs as possible. There may be a way to work around your child's anxiety if they have all the facts and are prepared in advance. For example if your dentist is aware that noise is an issue, they may be able to turn off any machines and work without them.
- Children with noise sensitivities may want to wear ear defenders to give them extra comfort, even if machines are off they still may feel anxious that the machines may start up again.
- Sometimes allowing your child's interest into the room during the examination can provide comfort and distraction. The dentist may put on music of your child's choice if you ask them.
- You may want to use a sand timer or an egg timer to show your child that the examination will come to an end and they can go off to something more pleasant after.
- If your child is able to express what they like and dislike, it is good to get them to vocalise this to the dentist so the dentist can come up with alternatives and talk with your child to ease their anxiety.

Sometimes children are too anxious to be examined. It may be that your usual family dentist may refer your child to a specialist dentist who has more expertise in treating children with high levels of anxiety.